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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses problems the author encountered in attempting to conduct a study of teacher motivation as influenced by a combination of participative decision-making and financial rewards. Over a 3-year period, teacher motivation was to be viewed as influenced by two independent variables--participative decision-making and financial rewards; in the second year, teacher effectiveness and student achievement were to be added as dependent variables. Initial difficulties were encountered in defining motivation, participative decision-making, and, to a lesser degree, financial rewards; further difficulties arose from the assumption of positive correlations among the four variables. To test the validity of these projected correlations, the author planned to compare a control school where no changes would be implemented with a second school where only financial rewards would be instituted and finally, with a third school implementing both participative decision and financial rewards. Thus far, the author has not found a setting in which to carry out the study to its completion. The author concludes by speculating that the reason he has been unable to do so is that school administrators view participative decision making as a threat to existing power relationships. (JBM)

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THEORY ORIENTED RESEARCH: Problems and Challenges*

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Studies focused on the nature of the organization have not been a significant part of the educational administration literature. One of the reasons for the situation is the absence of new taxonomies described by Mackett at this meeting last year in San Marcos. There are other reasons as well.

The theme of this paper is to describe a recent attempt to conduct theory oriented research that would have a direct bearing on the structure of a school. The paper is written somewhat like a case study in order to describe two major problems. The first was encountered in the design phase of the study when the attempt was made to define the variables. The second problem was related to finding a setting for the study.

The project was to be a study of teacher motivation and how such motivation might be influenced by a combination of participative decision making and financial rewards. The reader will recognize immediately that the idea hearkens back to the Scanlon Plan which has been successfully utilized in industry for about fifty years. Essentially, the Scanlon Plan calls for groups of workers to form teams out of which come suggestions for work improvements. Should any such improvements turn out to save money for the company, a portion of the savings would be returned to be shared equally among the members of the originating group.

The plan for the study of teacher motivation evolved over about a ten year period. Originally, it seemed that if a school staff (teachers and principal) had complete control over the operation of the school, the staff could effect many money saving changes. The saved money could then be used for purposes acceptable to the staff, including dividing it equally among all members.

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As the project evolved, it became much more complex. The basic format remained in that money saving procedures were still the targets and that any monies saved would be used for purposes approved by the staff.

The final version of the project called for a rather lengthy planning period during which training of the staff might also be necessary. Such training would be aimed at improving the basic processes of the organization, an organizational development type of intervention. About a semester to a year would be spent by the staff planning for the coming program. Program decisions, staffing decisions, and management decisions would all be fair game in this arrangement. This, of course, is the process known as participative decision making which has a rather remarkable track record for improving employee morale (Frost, Wakely, and Ruh, 1974).

Naturally, no board of education or superintendent would be willing to turn loose a school so the staff could do anything it wished. Thus the plan called for several guarantees the staff had to make to the system. The first was that the system-wide educational programs would be continued in the school. The second was that student achievement as measured by system wide tests would not slip.

Several other features of the program might be of interest. The staff had to agree to pay back to the system ten percent of the money saved. In return, the system had to call off its corps of supervisors while making available to the school the normal material resources given to all schools. Just as in Scanlon Plan companies, the staff members of the experimental school were assured of their regular salaries. Participation did not jeopardize their contracts. Finally, the system had to agree to discourage visitations at the school during the experimental period.

The second year, the focus of the project shifted to student outcomes where student achievement was highlighted. The staff was to be paid a bonus if student achievement increased above a predetermined level (agreed upon by the staff and the system). The idea here, of course, was to focus on the effectiveness of the instructional program measured by comparing current gain scores with those attained in previous years.

This then, in brief, was the study to be conducted. It was to take at least three years to complete but would not require outside funding. It was to be an attempt to influence teacher motivation utilizing concepts from the organization theory literature.

Development of the study

During the ten or so years the idea for the study was evolving, there was a rather startling and wonderful metamorphosis in the national concern for public education. Originally, the idea began as a personal interest in raising the morale of teachers. This was to be accomplished by making them rulers of their work settings, fully responsible for all that occurred. As their efforts began to bear fruit in terms of achievement gains, the teachers would be financially rewarded. Even ten years ago there was ample justification for the study because it was evident that most schools were not fully accomplishing their stated objectives. SAT scores, however, had not yet begun to plummet and an interest in the basic skills rested largely with people accused of living in the Dark Ages.

Complacency was shortly replaced with alarm, however, when the decline of SAT scores became identified as a trend. The sole response then became, "back to the basics."

Other factors indicating a need for more effective schools were on the scene as well. Enrollments continued to decline which caused James March to declare education a "declining industry" (1973). Yet, in spite of enrollment declines, in Georgia and other states a teacher shortage developed. These shortages resulted as teachers fled their classrooms and the attendant low salaries, intimidating administrators, dominating parents, and uncontrollable students. One could go on and on with the litany of educational problems of the past decade. Suffice it to say, however, that there was more than sufficient justification for a study aimed at making schools more effective.

Then came 1983 and the clarion call of the Secretary of Education calling for master teachers who would be paid like college professors. Immediately following, the President decided that education made good politics and the merit pay rush was on. The fact that merit pay plans have a rather dismal success record in the multitude of systems in which it has been attempted did nothing to deter our national leaders. In fairness, there is probably good reason for these leaders not to back away from their merit pay stands. It not only is logical to pay more to those who are doing a good job but there is evidence that higher pay is motivational as well (Katz and Kahn, 1978).

The problem with merit pay is that it is good for those who receive the additional money but is does nothing to motivate the rest of the organization. Merit pay plans miss the mark of improving the quality of education for all students but do reward the superior teacher and possibly encourage him or her

to stay in education a while longer.

So this was the evolution of the idea that prompted the study of teacher motivation. It was set in a culture which places a high value on individual excellence and one that is willing to reward financially those who prove to be superior. It was simply coincidence that the national concern for public education reached a high point at the time the study was being proposed. Such timeliness, however, helped establish the urgency for the study.

Design considerations

It should come as no surprise that a difficult part of the project has been casting the variable of teacher motivation into a suitable research format. For the first portion of the study, lasting about two years, teacher motivation was to be viewed as the dependent variable influenced by two independent variables, participative decision making and financial rewards. During the second portion, lasting another year, two additional dependent variables were to be added, teacher effectiveness and student achievement.

A second difficulty was encountered in trying to find definitions for the variables. Not surprisingly, teacher motivation has been the most elusive.

The concept of motivation has troubled behavioral scientists throughout the century. Whether such people represent psychology, sociology, political science or anthropology, there is no universal definition of the concept. There is likewise no agreement on whether motivation is an internal or external phenomenon, whether or not it is learned, or if it is some sort of process by which one attains desired goals. The only generalization that can be made about motivation definitions is that they make a statement about energizing human behavior, about attainment of goals, and about maintaining the desired behavior (Miskel, 1982).

For the purposes of the study, therefore, a middle ground position has been taken. Motivation is defined as a process by which idiosyncratic prompting forces influence the selection, intensity and persistence of certain behaviors.

In some respects, participative decision making has been an even more complex variable because it is viewed as a multiple person phenomenon complete with status differentials, setting variables and environmental variables. The most difficult aspect, however, is the uniqueness of the process simply because it is evolutionary. Two schools could well have highly successful participative decision processes but the two processes would differ dramatically.

The best that could be done in this study has been to describe the decision areas given over to the staff (the teachers and the principal). Such areas include personnel decisions, program decisions, instructional materials decisions, and parent and community decisions.

The variable of financial rewards has perhaps not been quite so complicated. As one begins to explore the phenomenon more deeply, however, financial rewards may become manifestations of one's ability to achieve. Then the variable becomes complex and idiosyncratic.

Once again, in this study financial rewards have been defined as money saved within the experimental schools and distributed according to the wishes of the staff. Since the distribution pattern may vary from school to school, further definition of the term is fruitless.

In planning the latter portion of the study another difficulty has been encountered as it is assumed that the motivation level of the staff is positively correlated with the staff's effectiveness. To complicate matters further, it is also assumed that improved staff effectiveness will be positively correlated with measurable gains in student achievement. These are gross assumptions but the only way to determine if they are off the mark is to conduct the research.

An experimental design has been used in the study. Several different formats have been developed to conform to the tolerance levels of the systems considered as settings. All of the formats call for at least one school having the entire experiment which consists of a participative decision making process, an OD consultant and financial rewards. Two other schools are identified in the basic format. One is the control school in which no activities occur other than testing and completing instruments. The other school is one in which financial rewards are the only variables studied. Here the principal is the decision maker but if any division of the savings occur, all members of the staff share equally. This third type of school became a necessary part of the formats because of the need to factor out the effects of financial rewards.

As mentioned above, the evolutionary and, therefore, idiosyncratic nature of the participative decision process has caused design problems. It is tempting to cast the project into a case study/ethnographic format because of the problems with definitions and variable identification. Such an idea has been resisted, however, because of questions about the validity of the case study approach. Such questions revolved about the methods used to identify hypotheses and the relatively short on site time spent by most educational

ethnographers.

Unanticipated events

The final section of this paper describes a series of events that was not anticipated. Essentially, the problem was that no system was interested enough in the project to provide the schools. This eventuality should not have been a surprise. A number of people after reviewing the proposal had expressed enthusiasm for the study but had also indicated that the problem would be finding experimental schools. A number of classroom teachers also reviewed the proposal. Almost without exception, their reaction was one of total support for the idea, but they also doubted that their principals would allow such a program in their schools.

In spite of this cautionary advice, little difficulty was anticipated, because entrees to the systems were to be via former students. In all cases, the former students had given assurances that there would be no problem in attaining approval for the project and that the study was exactly what the system needed.

As of this date, three school systems have been approached. The one generalization that can be made from the experiences is that one must be patient and not expect to receive an answer immediately. The waiting period for the first system was one year. Actually, it was longer because the system never responded even though the two contacts were an assistant area superintendent and the board of education president. An answer was received from the second system after five months; and the third, after prompting, took six months.

Obviously, the first system did not see the project as an answer to any of its problems. The second system, after taking three months instead of the promised two weeks to review the written proposal, requested an informal discussion between the experimenter and its research advisory committee. The "informal discussion" turned into a hearing with the experimenter seated at a solitary table and the committee arrayed in curved fashion at the front of the room. The setting certainly would have done justice to a Senate Investigating Committee. What was billed as a discussion, of course, turned out to be an interrogation.

The membership of the research advisory committee consisted of two building principals, the director of research, the director of elementary education, the director of tests and measurements, and a parent. The questions raised issues such as the amount of money it was possible to save, whether or not the State would allow an waiver of pupil/teacher ratios,

whether or not the accrediting associations would support the project, the probable slowness of the school's decision making process, and the need for the principal to make the final decision on all matters.

No teachers were present. The only non-middle management person, the parent, indicated that she felt teachers would love to work in such a setting, particularly since they would be making the instructional decisions.

A final point that was made by two different persons at different points in the meeting was concerned with student achievement. Both comments indicated that there was no need to be concerned with student achievement because the children of that district would learn no matter what the educators did.

After being unsuccessful with two systems, the third system was approached directly through the superintendent in a personal conference. The superintendent indicated he had no objection to the project but would not speak for his principals. He had several principals in mind in whose schools such a project could be conducted. The meeting concluded with the superintendent's promise to be back in touch shortly. Four months later, the experimenter initiated another contact to determine if a misunderstanding had occurred. This last contact stimulated an informal meeting with the three principals, the superintendent, and the researcher. The superintendent was verbally supportive of the project even indicating that additional money might be available from the State Department of Education.

One principal indicated that he was too near retirement to be involved in a new pattern of organization. The second said he saw no problem with the proposal, while the third said he would like to participate in a limited way. He wanted to retain control of his school but would be willing to test the impact of financial rewards.

The meeting concluded with the promise that the system would be in touch in a week to ten days. Four weeks later a letter was received in which the superintendent said he had met with the principals several days after the meeting and they had decided they would rather not be involved at this particular time.

Certain speculations come to mind after these experiences:

1. This project and others like it probably represent a fundamental threat to the organization. The familiar hierarchical arrangements of the system represent a type of security blanket for principals and mid-level central office personnel.

2. Those occupying middle management positions are not risk takers but excuse givers. They are most adept at thinking up reasons the state department, accrediting association, superintendent, the board, or even parents would not like a new idea. An interesting footnote here is that clever superintendents can and do recognize this attribute among subordinates and use it to protect themselves from petitioners

3. The people whose feelings are rarely considered are the teachers. That they are perceived by their principals and middle managers as subordinates brings into focus the reports from surveys of teachers leaving the profession about insensitive administrators.

4. Research proposed from outside the system may be conducted so long as it: a. Does not require the system to make a long time commitment (there is not a great problem with a project lasting a quarter or a semester, there is a real problem with a project that lasts more than a year); b. Does not require an inordinate amount of effort on the part of the managers of the system and schools; c. Does not pose a threat, even in an experimental way, to the basic relationships of the system; and d. Is backed by outside funding.

In conclusion

Past efforts in developing theory and conducting research in educational administration may be characterized as largely applications of earlier efforts in the behavioral sciences. Original thinking has rarely been a part of efforts made by those from within the field of education. Even in the rare exception, the research was focused on the behavior of the administrator and did not call into question the nature or structrure of the organization (Gross, 1958).

That there is a need for careful studies of schools as organizations appears irrefutable. The widespread condemnation of public schools proves the point.

Two very real and immediate problems connected to such studies were reviewed in this paper. The first was essentially a conceptual or methodological problem. It dealt with the number of and the relationships among variables encountered in conducting research of educational organizations.

The second problem, access, proved to be more immediate and in the short term, more serious. One really cannot understand how little he or she understands without experimenting with actual, on-going organizations. Yet when the experiment calls into question existing hierarchical arrangements and power relationships, access becomes difficult at best and often

impossible.

This, of course, is not a new problem. Existing structures become obsolete and ineffective. Such was the case shortly after World War II in private industries around the world. Almost immediately, job and organization redesign efforts began in England, Norway, Sweden and India. Shortly thereafter the industries of Japan began to focus on quality. The point is that as organizations become incapable of attaining their objectives efficiently, the organizations are redesigned.

A serious student of educational organizations must occasionally despair when thinking about the possiblity of school officials realizing their structures are obsolete. There may be hope, however, in the public attention now being focused on education because of the efforts of Secretary Bell and President Reagan. Perhaps when it is all said and done, students of educational organizations will be able to say that all the rhetoric was worthwhile because it forced school officials to look at their organizations. After such critical scrutiny, the officials may be more willing to permit experimentation with different work patterns and structures.

In the meantime, the search for a setting to house this study continues.

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